

Light, Darkness, & Joy

a sermon preached on the Feast of

The Epiphany

6 January 2008

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Lections: Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Triumph of light over darkness is an enduring motif in human myth-making. It is said that the success of both the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and the *Harry Potter* seven-part-epic is linked to this fact. And it's a fair guess that the so-called 'war on terror' is saleable to the Western public because of the same underlying mythology. I remember emerging from the cinema after both parts one and two of the Lord of the Rings, after three hours of horrendous violence and bloodshed, reeling and staggering into the street. I'd had more than enough slaughter by then and didn't bother going back for third helpings. While some christian commentators were making an enthusiastic case for the Rings trilogy as a vehicle for proclamation of the 'gospel in disguise', what struck me was how profoundly anti-Christian it is. There is triumph over darkness, certainly. There is love and sacrifice also. But in the Rings trilogy darkness is defeated by slaughter, on a colossal scale.

Perhaps this is why the *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* are industries worth billions of dollars, while the gospel of Jesus Christ remains fundamentally unpopular. True, the bible is said to be the largest-selling book in the world, and some christians make much of this deceptive statistic. However, all this proves is that there is a world of difference between the bible and the gospel. To be more precise, possessing and reading the bible does not of itself guarantee an understanding of the *εὐαγγέλιον* *evangellion* of Jesus Christ crucified and risen. It is possible to possess a bible, even to defend it and to purport to be a faithful expositor of it, but when such defence is in any way violent the good news of Jesus Christ is simultaneously betrayed. The cases of both the 'war on terror' and the conservative war on liberalism in the church demonstrate that the myth of *The Lord of the Rings* is actually much more popular, and is in fact the operative myth. In the case of the former, supposedly christian nations purport to be bringing truth and light to 'gentile' nations, by means of political interference, sophisticated weaponry and slaughter. In the case of the latter, supposedly bible-believing christians purport to be bringing biblical inerrancy to the rest of the Anglican Communion by means of coercion, threat and expulsion. As for Africa - our attention inescapably drawn there today as we pray for Kenya - O Africa, continent of such promise, vigorous and forthright promoter of a so-called 'fresh biblical christianity', yet torn apart by tribal violence and ethnic cleansing.

By contrast, the gospel of Jesus Christ revealed in Matthew's birth narrative promises that darkness will be defeated, but not by slaughter or violence of any kind. The Light, Matthew tells us, the Light of 'God with us', is born in lowliness – not in triumph. And the reaction to the Light is always deadly Herodian violence. ¹ Whenever and wherever the Light becomes manifest the unavoidable reaction is always the fear and destruction of Herods who recognise that the Light threatens their grip on power. Herod always pretends to be interested in the Light – there are few more chilling words than these in the Gospels: "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him bring me word, so that I may also go and pay him homage." ² Fearful, jealous, anxiety-ridden and oppressive powers everywhere are frequently accomplished at giving the impression of being interested in others, and the smoothness and seductiveness of their speech fools many. In reality, as Matthew's story makes clear, their intent is self-interested and murderous.

Let us step back for a moment at this point. When I was teaching English to teenagers a popular teaching technique was to interrupt a story, at such a juncture as this interview between Herod and the Magi, and ask the students to imagine a different development, and how that might change the

¹ Matthew 2:16-18

² Matthew 2:8

outcome. Surely these wise Magi could see through Herod's smooth-talking, snake-oil-salesman, smarmy public-relations smile? Surely they must have known that even to pay a visit to Herod was to put the very object of their search, the 'King of the Jews', at risk? ³ Could Matthew not have written a story in which the Magi bypassed Herod altogether, thereby safeguarding both the Christ child and the countless hundreds of baby boys of Bethlehem? Presumably so. But Matthew's story reveals a fundamental truth of the gospel, signalled in this short birth narrative, which will be the pattern for the life of Jesus and the life of the church subsequently. The powers of darkness must first become manifest. The Rings trilogy and Harry Potter get this much right. The revealing of the Light simultaneously exposes all that would oppose the Light. The Magi's visit to Herod is the necessary step. Herod's darkness must be revealed for what it really is. The nation that would purport to be the light to the world inevitably must have its own concealed darkness exposed for all to see. At Abu Graib, and in countless other ways, the inner darkness of a proud nation is uncomfortably and embarrassingly exposed. The hidden bitter divisions among Anglican conservatives, hell-bent on their own exercise of power, must similarly embarrassingly reveal themselves for all to see – especially likely in these last six months of aggressive limbering-up for the Lambeth Conference in July. ⁴ The violent tribalism of proud African christianity must be shamefully exposed.

Matthew is no romantic, and his gospel is not sentimental or blinkered optimism. Herod, having been thwarted by the Magi, will go to any lengths to enforce his grip on power. A powerful nation demonstrates that it is willing to go to any lengths to enforce its violent and anti-democratic will over the rest of the world. Conservatives and puritans in the Anglican Communion have been flexing their muscles for some time, demonstrating that any means can be justified by the end, which is in truth the desire for a Herodian grip on power and control, and which amounts to exclusion of gentiles. The little child, who is the Light, terrifies Herod. Herod's instinctive reaction is violent. But Herod cannot destroy the child – Herod will die. ⁵ This failure to destroy the Light, though it is paid for with the lives of countless innocents, is the price and the inevitable cost of spiritual growth. This, of course, is neither palatable nor popular religion.

Common to both the Lord of the Rings and the gospel of Jesus Christ is the insight that though the Light cannot be destroyed it can be forced to withdraw. The preparation for the Light takes place out of sight, secretly, hidden. "Get up," the angel warns Joseph, "take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you." ⁶ Hostile kingdoms *seem* to retain their hold, for a time. Innocents suffer. All seems to be lost. Emmanuel will be forced to withdraw before the Herods of this world. Matthew's infancy narrative gospel-in-little reveals, however, that the withdrawal is only temporary and necessary so that the powers of darkness be made manifest.

What makes the Rings and the gospel of Jesus chalk and cheese is that the manifesting of the Light is never violent. When the Light is revealed he appears as one upon whom the Spirit rests; ⁷ who wrestles with his own inner darkness in the wilderness; ⁸ who proclaims that the blessed are the poor, the mourners, the meek, the hungry and thirsty for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted. ⁹ Ultimately, the Light to the Gentiles is revealed as the one who lays down his life rather than grasping it; who denounces the sword; ¹⁰ who comes to true Sonship through existential abandonment in the face of the world's violence – that is to say, on the cross. ¹¹

Matthew's story of the Magi reveals that in spite of the powers of darkness stalking both the world and the church, nevertheless because the Light to the Gentiles is unstoppable – guided by God's angels and the Divine language of dreams – the work of homage, the joy of true worship is equally unstoppable. In spite of the smarmy smiling, smooth-talking and malevolent Herod, they continued to follow the star which had already been their guide. "And when they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy." ¹² Joy, deep joy in spite of the menace and threat of the powers of violence and fear, is a sure sign of being on the way to salvation. In spite of the menace of the powers of darkness, out of sheer joy treasure chests of love and devotion are opened and offered in the presence of the Light.

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³ Matthew 2:2

⁴ See Andrew Brown, "Dither on, Williams", *The Guardian*, 3 January 2008, http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/andrew_brown/2008/01/over_the_last_few_years.html

⁵ Matthew 2:19

⁶ Matthew 2:13

⁷ Matthew 3:16-17

⁸ Matthew 4:1-10

⁹ Matthew 5:3-10

¹⁰ Matthew 26:52

¹¹ Matthew 27:46

¹² Matthew 2:10